



February 19, 2020

Bill: Environmental Accountability and Transparency Act (HB614)

Position: Favorable

Dear Chairman Barve and Members of the Committee,

Blue Water Baltimore's mission is to restore the quality of Baltimore's rivers, streams, and Harbor to foster a healthy environment, a strong economy, and thriving communities. We are the home of the Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper and are committed to holding polluters accountable. We respectfully request your support of the Environmental Accountability and Transparency Act (HB614/SB460).

In recent years, the Maryland Departments of the Environment (MDE), Agriculture, and Natural Resources have faced significant staff reductions. This fact, coupled with MDE's stated priority for "collaboration over confrontation," has resulted in fewer enforcement actions taken by the agency. Marylanders have a legal right to step in to help enforce environmental laws when governments fail to act. But in order to do so, residents and organizations like ours must be able to easily access environmental enforcement data.

Public documents such as MDE investigation reports of potentially noncompliant facilities, pending and existing National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPDES) permits for those facilities, and Discharge Monitoring Reports could help local residents and environmental groups pinpoint bad actors in their communities and enforce the Clean Water Act. However, these documents are often only made available when a Public Information Act (PIA) request is filed with the proper agency. Requiring individuals to file PIA requests for this type of basic information creates unnecessary hurdles for concerned community members, and responding to these PIA requests puts an additional burden on enforcement agencies that are already overwhelmed and under-resourced.

By creating a point person for pollution complaints and posting information online, this bill will increase public access to information to help enforce environmental protections. Specifically, this bill will establish an Environment & Natural Resources Ombudsman within the Attorney General's office to assist residents with pollution complaints. This Ombudsman will also be tasked with maintaining a website with information regarding pollution complaints, inspections of facilities, enforcement actions, and information on the status of facility permits. In my professional experience as Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper, I can attest that these improvements will make it significantly easier to track compliance and take meaningful enforcement action against polluters who are degrading Maryland's waterways.

We urge a favorable report on HB614.

Sincerely,

Alice Volpitta
Baltimore Harbor Waterkeeper